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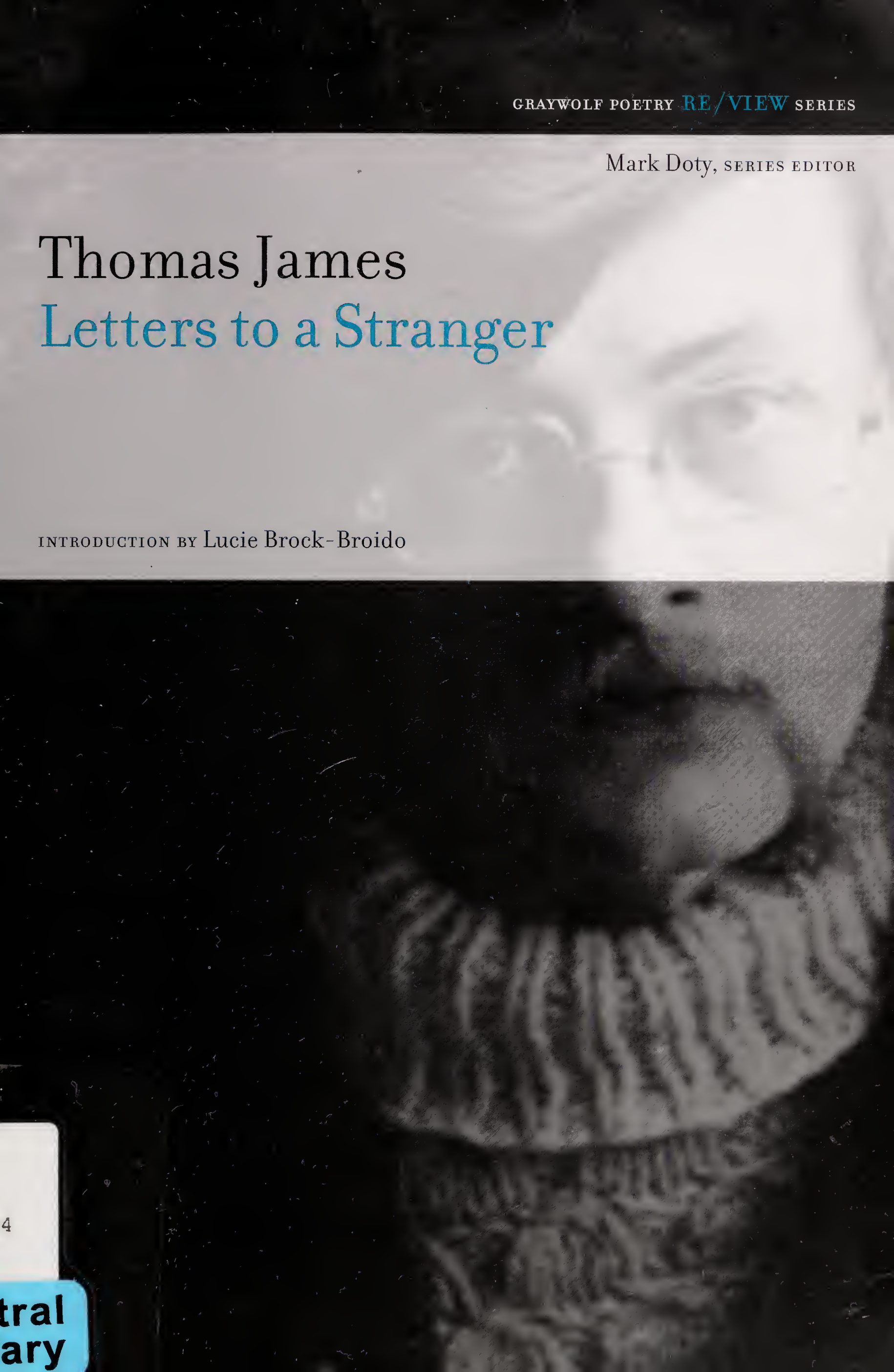
Mark Doty, SERIES EDITOR

Thomas James
Letters to a Stranger

INTRODUCTION BY Lucie Brock-Broido



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The Graywolf Poetry Re/View Series

Thomas James (1946–1974) published only one book in his lifetime. *Letters to a Stranger*—lush and stark at once, cool and fierce, drunk on the dark allure of Plath's *Ariel* but distinctly its own, Gothic original—was little acknowledged upon publication. But James has quietly haunted the conversation of American poetry for more than thirty years. Now this legendary book returns, here with thirteen uncollected poems and a riveting introduction by Lucie Brock-Broido that is itself an urgent missive "to a stranger"—a love letter, a biography and exorcism all at once.

Mark Doty, Series Editor

The Graywolf Poetry Re/View Series brings essential books of contemporary American poetry back into the light of print. Each volume—chosen by series editor Mark Doty—is introduced by a poet who comes to the work with a passionate admiration. The Graywolf Poetry Re/View Series offers all-but-lost masterworks of recent American poetry to a new generation of readers.

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Letters to a Stranger by Thomas James,
with an introduction by Lucie Brock-Broido

The Salt Ecstasies by James L. White,
with an introduction by Mark Doty (forthcoming)

Thomas James

Letters to a Stranger

Graywolf Press
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The thirteen Uncollected Poems were assembled from unpublished typescripts as well as poems previously published in magazines and an anthology. "Rural Winter" was in typescript only, with the author identifying himself as Thomas Bojeski. "Dragon's Teeth," "Waterlilies," and "Golden Fleece" were in typescript only; the typescript of "Waterlilies" included handwritten corrections from the author, and the corrections are honored in the version of the poem appearing here. "Rural Winter" and "Dragon's Teeth" appeared in *Tin House* (summer 2008). "Timothy," "Spider in the Grapes," and "Tom O' Bedlam among the Sunflowers" appeared in *Heartland II: Poets of the Midwest*, edited by Lucien Stryk (Northern Illinois University Press, 1975). "Suicide," "In Fever," "Gangrene," "Tom O' Bedlam Makes Love," "Pears on the Windowsill," and "The Wharf" appeared in *Seneca Review* (Volume XIII, Number 1, 1982-1983).

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Introduction

I

It is September 1977 and this autumn is a gorgeous one, just like the one I am writing to you from three decades later. *I am thinking of you now.* Richard Howard sails into our first workshop in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins and asks his twelve new graduate poetry students (I am the thirteenth, permitted by luck and circumstance to sit in) to recite the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The best minds of my generation, collectively, come up with about six of them. Richard is not amused. He then requires a recitation of the names of the Nine Muses. We get all but two. A slight scowl is provoked. *All the while I am thinking of you.* Richard takes from his bookbag this text: Daniel Halpern's *American Poetry Anthology,* a new collection of poets, some published for the first time, all under forty, including Frank Bidart, Rita Dove, Louise Glück, Linda Gregg, Robert Hass, Gregory Orr, and Charles Wright. Of the seventy-six poets included, only one has two dates after his name in the index: Thomas James (1946–1974).

Richard Howard applies his monocle to his right eye and reads aloud one poem, Thomas James's "Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh." *I will last forever. I am not impatient*— The poem is a soliloquy in the voice of a young girl from Thebes in the year 1051 BC as she is being mummified according to *The Egyptian Book of the Dead.* For all the physical violences of the process, her descriptions are luminous, romantic, graphically and magically sensual. *I was so important!,* she writes, *I wanted to sit up.*

So taken is she, Lady J., with the lyrical process of having her

body made to last forever, she writes: *Before I learned to love myself too much, / My body wound itself in spools of linens.*

Even as I write to you, it is just past the cusp of thirty years ago when I first heard those words. My world was changed, as would my work change, indelibly—the whole Music of what would Happen. *A basalt scarab wedged between my breasts / Replaced the tinny music of my heart.*

So began this journey. The first thing that happened was that I wrote a poem back to Thomas James. It was called "Pornography," and it was eighty pages long. So bizarre and unintelligible was it that I composed a prose companion to it, which I calligraphed, and then I illustrated that. No one will ever read this poem.

I went in search of this young man, Thomas James. If I had come into this world a bit earlier, if I had been a boy, if I had been gay and raised Lutheran, if I had been born in Joliet, Illinois, *Letters to a Stranger*—Thomas's first book, last book, only book—would have been *my* book, my "First World," the one first book I would have written in some other life.

II

Thomas Edward Bojeski was born on June 2, 1946. Soon after New Year's Day, on January 7, 1974, he shot himself in the head with a .45 caliber handgun. He meant to go. In 1972, he lost both his parents within ten days of one another. He was twenty-seven years old and had just published his first book, *Letters to a Stranger,* which would receive only one review—a withering one—calling Thomas James a "pale Plath." A day before his death, he had phoned Lynn, his sister (and only remaining member of his immediate family), to say goodbye. The last time Lynn saw him had been the day after Christmas 1973. They were at Union train station in Joliet, and she remembered only his turning back and waving to her before he left for godknowswhere. At his death

two weeks later in early January, he left a note, but no one remembers where it is or what it said.

But he had left a book, and this book is a long embellishing of suicide itself. There is a Thou throughout this text, singular and other, religious and erotic—these "letters" are addressed, of course, to "a stranger." And it is you; it is I; it is the beloved, the Master; it is God; he is strange, and stranger too. So much of the book is modeled after Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. Thomas was drunk with Plath. His high romance with *Ariel* puts her genetic dispositions all over these poems. And he was under the spell of Georg Trakl, a suicide too, also at the age of twenty-seven. And Frank Stanford, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at twenty-nine. And Roethke. And Thomas's teacher, Lucien Stryk. But it is mostly Plath, her drama and her excellence, her extremity and gift, her apparitions and her fate. Her inevitability.

In the three decades that I've hankered backward for this book, toward whence it came, almost everything and everybody that has had a connection to Thomas or to his work has disappeared or died along the way. So peculiar have these vanishings been, I admit that I am slightly spooked to be the vessel to bring this extraordinary text back into the world. In 1994, seventeen years after hearing "Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh," I found Thomas's sister, Lynn, in Joliet, and went to stay with her, but now I've lost her too. After a sustaining and sweet connection, I've not heard from her for thirteen years. She's left no clue save a strange message that she was "moving west." I cannot find even a trace of her anymore.

In 1980, I met a young fiction writer at Columbia named Allen Barnett, and one night at the Abbey Pub on the Upper West Side, I told him about this journey I was on. Astonishing: Allen had known Thomas in Joliet; they had been in a theater troupe together. I had my first clue then. Allen told me that Thomas James's real name was *Bojeski*—Thomas had thought his own name too "unpoetic," and so used as his surname, instead,

his mother's maiden name. Allen told me that Tom was born in Joliet, that his whole family was gone, all of them, save a sister who survived, perhaps still in Joliet, but went by (yet) another (married) name.

The last time I saw Allen was through a revolving door—into the old *New Yorker* offices; he was leaving, and I was going in. His first story was to come out in the magazine; I was on my way to visit my soon-to-be editor. Allen's first book, *The Body and Its Dangers* (both the book's title as well as the final story are taken from "Reasons," the last poem in *Letters to a Stranger*) would begin also with this epigraph from Thomas James: *If I could reach you now, in any way / At all, I would say this to you. . . .* This was the last time I ever saw Allen Barnett. On August 14, 1991, he died of complications from AIDS. *I am present for the news of an enormous death.*

III

It is the autumn of 1981, and I am languishing in my old hometown of Pittsburgh, in a dark year, one haunted by many of my own ghosts. Since Richard Howard had read us James's work, I had been looking all over America for one copy of his book. I found that copy in the Carnegie Library on Forbes Avenue in Pittsburgh. It had been checked out only once: July 28, 1977. I put the book in the back of my jeans, between the blousy white shirt I'd worn and the waistband of my pants. I walked out of the library with that book. It was pre-security for Great Literature. *Letters to a Stranger* is the only book I've ever stolen. Until now, you could not lay hold of a copy of that book, but it has existed in hundreds and hundreds of xeroxed copies across the country, a small underground railroad of reading for young poets. *Letters to a Stranger* was, and is still, the most ravishing (and ravished) first book of poetry I've read. Thomas James's cadences, his transformations, are in my head every single time I write. *I have been rereading your letters.*

By the mid-1980s, I had moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and thought to call the poet whom I'd recently met at a reading, Peter Davison, who was the poetry editor at Houghton Mifflin, the house which had published *Letters* a decade earlier. Peter told me he would investigate, try to comb through some old records at the press. It turned out that a man named Arthur Gould at the Gould Literary Agency in Evanston, Illinois, had originally brought the book to Houghton Mifflin. Peter could find no editor on record who had worked with Thomas or with the book itself. And Peter will not have lived to see this book come back into print. How did this odd—unlikely—and intoxicating first book make its way into the world?

I have taught the book, year after year, first at Harvard, then Columbia, always in fierce violation of copyright. I've given talks at Iowa, at Washington University, at the Bennington Writing Seminars, in Gainesville, in Houston, Missoula, Los Angeles; wherever I've read, I've taken the manuscript with me. Students are enthralled by the poems. In fact, to this day, it is still the book which most influences and captivates young writers, beyond and above all other first books. *My genius is intact.*

IV

How is it, exactly, that I can explain the peculiar spell cast between poets and this text? How is it that, when I teach this book, invariably, young poets seem to want to go home (as soon as possible) to write back to Thomas James, to begin their own dialogue with him? I doubt that it is simply that Thomas's particular darknesses are (in particular) more remarkable than others', in fact, but somehow the bounty of his metaphors seem more edgy, strangely more inviting, bewitching even, than most. Thomas James's protégés want to reach him, see him, raise him (in all senses of that term), risk for risk.

Perhaps it is the looming presence of Federico García Lorca's

duende in these pages—that force, writes Lorca, which "loves ledges and wounds." I do not know a text more capable of circumnavigating these ledges, nor tampering with these wounds, troubling them, stitching and unstitching their embroidered and lacerated edges than *Letters*.

In his 1930 essay, "The Duende: Theory and Divertissement," Lorca wrote: "All that has black sounds has *duende*. . . . These black sounds are the mystery, the roots fastened in the mire that we all know and all ignore, the fertile silt that gives us the very substance of art." Lorca goes on to describe the three forces—the Angel, the Muse, and the Duende—that "everyone senses and no philosopher explains."

According to Lorca, when the Angel sees death on the way, he flies in slow circles and "weaves tears of narcissus and ice." When the Muse sees death, she closes the door. But the Duende "will not approach at all if he does not see the possibility of death." Lorca writes: "Everywhere else, death is an end." Death's possibility—the necessity of its proximity—is that which makes art human and alive.

This omnipresent loom of death—the body and its dangers, the heart and its constancy of harm—is what makes the poetry of Thomas James so powerful. So ubiquitous is this power of "black sounds" that—according to a student who, in earnest, made a list of Thomas's touchstones, his word-hoard, his lexicon (such easy prey—moon, stone, bone, wound)—over a dozen instances of the word "dark" appear in this one book. But Lorca wrote, after all, that poems are works of art that have been "baptized in dark water."

V

Thomas James's gifts are extravagant. How did a man in his early twenties write with such wizardry and rigor, with such guile? The work is alight with the electric gestures of Robert Bly's "Leaping

Poetry" (which, in all likelihood, Thomas had not read; the first edition of Bly's book had been published only a year or so before Thomas's death). Bly explains this process of leaping, put simply, as the ability to associate "wildly." Here are some particularly transcendent metaphors in *Letters*, feats of wild association. In the title poem, Thomas writes (italics here and following are mine):

> Alexander died this morning,
> Leaving his worldly possessions
> To the strongest.
> I watched an empire fade across his lips.
> They propped him in the sun a while,
> And then three women came to scour his body
> *Like a continent.*

How does one compose a simile this far-fetched, this sparked with imagination, this curiously precise? Later, in this same poem, he writes of the snow "dismantling the weeds / *Like the breakable furniture of a boudoir.*"

In a poem called "Dissecting a Pig," he writes: "I have kept you in a laboratory jar / Comfortable as the *château* of your mother."

Or, in "Dragging the Lake," a persona poem in the voice of an odd Ophelia (a poem which has a curious kinship with both James Wright's "To the Muse," as well as Richard Hugo's "The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir"), Thomas speaks of "a sky *involved* with a stillborn moon." A plethora of moons exist in contemporary American poetry, many more than our fair share, in fact, and perhaps more than a handful have been "stillborn," after all. But no one has ever thought, heretofore, to tell us that the sky could be *involved* with such a moon.

In "Two Aunts," one of the most remarkable pieces in the book, Thomas tells us of his two Great Aunts, two farmer's daughters, "maiden ladies" who lived out their lives in a small

town in North Dakota where the Bojeski family had first settled. He addresses them:

> My ladies,
> *My dusky girls,* I see you
> With your bustles *puffed up like life preservers.* . . .

He tells us they were both heroin addicts who sprinkled opium on their oatmeal, who embroidered doilies with the drug. He identifies with them:

> I know what you meant.
> There was always the hunger,
> The death of small things
> Somewhere in your body,
> The children that would never
> *Take place* in either of you. . . .
> I see you ride the black hills of my mind,
> Sidesaddle, gowned in lemon silk,
> Galloping
> In your laced-up flesh, completely unaware
> Of something I inherited,
> The doubt,
> The fear,
> *The needle point of speech,*
> The hunger you passed down that I
> Possess.

Much later, I would learn from Thomas's sister that, in the nineteenth century, Aunt Rose "perished in a cyclone." And that Aunt Angie, one afternoon, "put her hand over her eyes and passed away in a chair." *I remember how I died. It was so simple! / One morning the garden faded. My face blacked out.*

Other effulgent examples abound, for instance, in "Luncheon with the Hangman":

> After the minor fractures of April,
>
> Slow convalescence, a montage of sky.
> The village clock, *punctual as a cricket,*
> Tapped the penetrable gray
>
> I mistook for sheep, a wooly light.

We have never heard of a cricket's "punctuality" before, though it will have its own true accuracy from now on.

Every way points to harm in Thomas James, so much is composed of omen, but over and again, he delivers these portents toward a kind of visionary salvation. In a poem called "Jason": "Fistfuls of brightness" bloom where he dreams "of the *innumerable antlers of winter.*" He has his own breed of near-Gothic sensibilities: "*Lobster-colored clouds* merge and pass / On the arbor's dilapidated bones."

He writes: "I learn the *lion color* of these hills" and "I come in dryshod, in my *mushroom-colored* coat." I cannot think of another writer as adept at confecting these odd marriages, except perhaps Flannery O'Connor, whose metaphors can be as singular and indelible as these. For example, in O'Connor's "Revelation," a girl in a doctor's office waiting room has a face that is "*blue* with acne"—a statement far-fetched, risky, and grotesquely precise at once. Or, in another O'Connor story, with menace and her gift for odd exactitude, she writes of a cloud that is "the exact color of the boy's hat and is shaped like a turnip."

VI

At least five of the poems in *Letters* are in direct dialogue with Plath's *Ariel*. "Waking Up," the invocating poem, is a near call-and-

response to Plath's opening poem "Morning Song." Likewise, "Carnations" is a response to Plath's "Tulips," as, in its own eccentric way, "Luncheon with the Hangman" corresponds to Plath's "The Hanging Man." And Thomas's "Longing for Death" (in addition to its alliance with another poem, written by Anne Sexton, called "Wanting to Die") is homage to Plath's "Death & Co." Further, "Laceration" has its alliance with Plath's "Cut." And finally, though the lexicon and sorcery and tonal urges are quite dissimilar, Thomas James's "Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh" must surely correspond—in some wild associative manner—to Plath's "Lady Lazarus," both rising, as they do, each from their own forms of dying—each as an art.

But Thomas James is not a "pale Plath" in any sense. He is simply engaged in an intense (and very intricate) conversation with *Ariel*. Both Plath and James were writing out of their own psychic heat, their urgency—*emergency*, in fact. For both poets, the "Thou," it is made clear, has betrayed, transgressed. Plath speaks with the sharp keen of rage; James is less angular. And Plath's "Thou" is dangerously present, immanent, in too-close proximity to her speaker. But for James, the "Thou" is far more distant; the ache is more mysterious and more abstract. In the crescendo of poems that closes James's book (his first, his last) is a poem called "Letter to a Mute." This Thou will not, *cannot* speak back. For Plath and James, the genius is intact—concrete, palpable, each with their own compulsion toward immortality. Like *Ariel*, this book *will* go on.

VII

Years pass (twenty in fact, thus far), and I am still trying to find Lynn Bojeski, now named—I have no idea. In 1993, Mark Wunderlich is one of my first new students at Columbia. During a seminar on first books, when just about everyone in the class falls in love with *Letters*, Mark stays late into the night with me—

the search has been stalled for a long time now. Mark comes up with the idea that we should try to find one "Gil Ross," the name of the man who took the author's photograph on the book jacket. We do research. We find him outside of Chicago. I phone him. He is cautious and says he knows nothing, only that Thomas James is dead, that perhaps I should try to find one "Kathryn Smith," who may now teach at the Francis Parker School in Chicago.

A week or so later, I find Kathryn at school. She is, at first, bewildered by my voice on the phone, then almost hostile. She bursts into tears. She says she cannot talk, not now, but perhaps in a while. She gives me a specific date and time to call her back. The date and time she gives me could not be worse—a Monday night in October, which happens to be right in the middle of my seminar. Weeks later, I let the seminar know we'll be taking a long break, and I tell them why. I phone Kathryn at the appointed time, and she relents; she has decided, with great trepidation, to speak to me. Too many people, incidents surrounding Thomas and his work were painful, sometimes violent, she says. I do not mean, I tell her, to dredge up old ghosts. *I'll lie here till the world swims back again.*

Months later, Kathryn winds up in Newburyport, Massachusetts, for medical treatment; she has been diagnosed with cancer and has decided to seek only alternative medicine. She stays with me in Cambridge and gives me the name and address of one of Thomas's oldest friends, Ron Thelo, who lives still in Illinois. We phone him that night, but get only his answering machine. I hear back from his lover, Gene Wojcik, who tells me, instead, to *write* to Ron—who is mortally ill, though I do not know it at the time. As for Kathryn, I lose hold of her too, and am shaken by the idea of trying to see if she is still alive and in this world.

VIII

On April 14, 1994, I write to Ron Thelo: *It's quite astonishing to realize that this one slim volume, now twenty-one years old, has had*

such a lasting and painfully lovely impact. Little by little, I have found pockets of poets across the country who know it, honor it, love it. . . . For me, oddly enough, I feel more akin to Thomas's book than to any other, save perhaps Emily Dickinson. I feel that intimate with Thomas's work. And so I am to be the one to help it back into the world. . . . In the letter, I ask him if he can help me find Thomas's sister's married name. I do not hear back from him.

Exactly four months later, I phone Ron but speak, again, to Gene. He has news. First, Ron has died. (Ron, he tells me, had been pleased to have heard from me, but was far too ill to respond.) And secondly, he has indeed found Lynn Bojeski's married name. She is Lynn Fisher now.

On August 14, I write to Gene: *It is well past midnight—hours since I phoned you. I am so deeply sorry to hear the news of Ron's death. . . . And I am troubled deep into the night, and wishing you well.*

What legacies abound. I am, after all, writing my own Letter to a Stranger, but somehow I feel oddly connected, not strange, though I've never even met any of your world out there. I have been immersed in Thomas's work, reading it aloud. I have his poems, now, almost to heart. But I've lost yet another link in this chain of gifts and losses. And how strange that the book just keeps going on with its going on. And it will *go on, I'll see to it. By the time this reaches you, I hope I'll have finally been in touch with Lynn Fisher. I'll try not to startle her. So much of this story passes on; I'm saddened and bewildered. . . . And all the more hell-bent on seeing this book back into the world.*

Gene writes back to me with a photograph of Ron Thelo, with this note: *Dear Lucie, Thanks for your letter. I've pondered these connections a lot in the last four months. Ron sent me this just after we met twenty-two years ago. It is by Edna St. Vincent Millay:*

It may well be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,

I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be, I do not think I would.

IX

By early September 1994, I found Lynn Fisher. On the telephone, she was, as I had expected, wildly suspicious of my intentions, all and any of them. She bristled and mistrusted at first, but gradually warmed to me. She spoke to me for a long time, and by the time we hung up, I had made plans to come see her. Within days, she posted me a Modigliani-esque ink sketch by Tom that she said he had drawn years ago. She had many paintings of his, line drawings, an unfinished novel, a play. She told me that he always signed his work "TOMB." Tomb, or Tom B., Thomas Bojeski. She wrote that she was certain that the enclosed sketch of the long-haired girl was me. She signed her letter, *Thank heavens you found me.*

I have now, in my office in New York, an oil painting of Tom's, a primitive—a slender girl standing at a meadow's edge, her hair in a thin ponytail, an imagined breed of tree in the distance with one single leaf falling from it, a hopelessly autumnal sky. I have a soft, lined-paper page—as if torn from an elementary school composition book—with his scrolls and doodles on it, little figurines, and some thirty practices of his signature, in an almost Victorian hand: *Thomas James, Thomas James, Thomas James* all over the page. I have a handful of poems he never published, now included here. And a list of poems he would have written had he stayed alive, all in the character he called Tom O' Bedlam. "Tom O' Bedlam Dances," "Tom O' Bedlam Enters the Asylum," "Tom O' Bedlam Walks in the Rain," "Tom O' Bedlam among the Fireflies."

On October 15, 1994, finally in Joliet, I write in my Tom B. journal: *I am with Lynn, Thomas's dining room. I am in Dickens*

country, new world—this is an old world. There are streets with names like Pickwick Court, Little Dorritt, Copperfield. This is rough country, a city of small gangs, a floating casino on an old docked riverboat, a town of old railways, penitentiaries (now shut down), and dirty dark canals. It's a city mourning the post-war 1950s, with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. This was a big union town, with a huge steel factory where Tom's father used to work as a guard. Tom himself worked as a night watchman at American Steel and Wire in the late 1960s.

Riding in their large, low-slung car with Lynn and her husband Bob and her son Mike, I am cold. I take flickering notes in my journal: *I am writing in long leather gloves, chill*. Then someone says, and I record: *Vice Lords, Gangster Disciples, the Latin Kings*. The town is home to two of the most notorious prisons in the country, Joliet Correctional Center, where Leopold and Loeb were sentenced to life in 1924, and Statesville, where Richard Speck lived and died. Even this late in the year, the corn in the fields outside of town still goes unharvested, withering. We drive to Thomas's grave, which is, as he wrote of a statue of Saint Francis behind a church, "upholstered in oak leaves." Likewise, Thomas's grave, bronze and level to the ground, is similarly upholstered by so many leaves. *The earth has taken on terrible proportions*.

Lynn's home is the house that she and Tom grew up in. It has been in the family for generations, built in 1893. It is tight and gray and plain and ramshackle. Seventeen cats live here now with Lynn. In the 1950s, seven members of the Bojeski family—Grandmother, Uncle Ray, Aunt Opal, Lynn, Tom, and his parents—lived there. It is a tiny place. Tom lived in a little room downstairs and slept on a hide-a-bed couch. She shows me Thomas's desk, a two-foot wide avocado pine secretary where he wrote his poems. Lynn works now in the city for the Bureau of Identification division of the State Police; she's a bookkeeper. Billy Graham, Lynn tells me, is her Master. She is married to Bob; her son Mike is an autodidact, a curious and rambling savant.

These are some of the things I wrote down that this young man told me in the car:

Tom was chasing apparitions, ghosts; he made the wrong choice. He should have been able to reinvent himself, a Greek necessity. . . . The soul is in a state of flux. Poets. . . instead of going forward, they use their writing to go back; they cloak *themselves.* Of Tom, his uncle, he tells me, he is . . . *not pissed. But T. was pathetic . . . There's a reason that people are given a madness. . . .* He speaks of Socrates' "geist," of Thomas Edison's 35,000 attempts at inventing the light bulb, of Salvador Dali lecturing in London in a deep-sea diver's suit, in fur-lined capes. *Socrates drank hemlock,* Mike says. *You cannot recant an absolute truth.*

X

No one in the family believes that Thomas killed himself. His brother-in-law, Bob, had gone to the morgue to identify him. He graphically describes the scene, Thomas's wound, the concrete slab, the tag affixed to his foot. *Tom was right-handed; his wound was on the left side of his head. How a right-handed guy could reach is bullshit. He was shot on his bed. There was someone else involved. . . . At the funeral, the casket was open and Aunt Opal shook it, shook the coffin back and forth.* We pass a street named "Bliss." This is true.

You were baptized in formaldehyde / Before I brought you to this strange autopsy.

I want to tell them to read his book again, that it is an homage to the autumnal, the inevitable, the going and the going on, the afterlife and all its jeweled states; that, in *Letters to a Stranger,* each gallery of weather leads to fall and dying off. In the title poem, Thomas writes:

The leaves have all gone yellow
Overnight, wrinkling like hands

In the updraught.
I drove my car by the creek
Because I had nowhere else to go.
The milkweed's delicate closet had been fractured,
Filling the air with rumors.
Despite all I could do, the sumac
Had taken on the color of a mouth.

In the poem called "Longing for Death," he writes: *I wanted to marry an absence*. I want to tell them: Thomas married his absence, wittingly, willingly, willfully.

The pageantry of the whole text itself is an intricate embalming—the body's *mereness* on its unstoppable journey toward corporeal oblivion, toward an ethereal infinitude. I believe Thomas James dreamed this book would last, somehow, that it would go on. He taught me the word "ichors," the fluid that runs through the veins of the gods, unlike a mortal's mere blood. The book is full of such embellished images of "mere" life, of "bruised" eyes traded in for precious stones. There are lacerations, intravenous needles, crutches (Thomas kept a collection of canes, for no particular reason I know of, except the odd elegance of their imagery), wounds both physical and otherwise: *I ride on my own diminishing*. . . . He speaks of "a terrible vertigo," of "small effulgences." He writes of being mute, of being strange. He is uninterested in Sin. *The saints have been turning to stone for a long, long time—*

Nuns lie under these plain stone markers.
Asleep in their long rows, whitely established
In the center of a hunger that was never theirs,
They do no blossoming.

"Room 101" is a rehearsal for "Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh," as are so many of his poems. "Room 101" is spo-

ken in the voice of a young man, already dead, being prepared for a world less damaging than this one is:

> I come to trade my flesh for stone.
>
> . . . On Saturday I watched them take
> My heart. Old relic, now you tick
>
> All night beneath my tablelamp.
>
> . . . Light hurts
> My eyes. I trade them both for quartz
> On Wednesday morning. I am made
> To last forever, girded bone.
> A hornet tests my sculptured skin.

Thomas James's lyric hallucinatory intensities seem to provoke his gift for ventriloquism—nine of the poems in *Letters to a Stranger* are personae. And no matter how far-fetched each voice may be, Thomas carries his own elegiac and immutable isolation to each of his "mutations"—incarnations, each, of his own embellishments and his truths, painfully alive.

I want to be a shepherd to this book, and not one of its lambs, grazing and inevitable, eventual, along the way of so many vanishings. Thomas writes: *The lambs are not aware of me.* I do not want to lose myself along the way of losing everyone and everything that surrounds this book, except the text itself. In "Lambs," he writes:

> I walk into the field, I am not afraid of them—
> They scatter like the last edges of a sickness.
> The sun has begun to enlarge its tawny fleeces
> At the expense of no one in particular.

In a letter, Emily Dickinson wrote: *Could we see all we hope, or hear the whole we fear told tranquil, like another tale, there would be madness near.*

Lady Jemutesonekh says, from her world 3,000 years ago, in the seventh, final septet of her soliloquy:

> When I come home the garden will be budding,
> White petals breaking open, clusters of night flowers,
> The far-off music of a tambourine.
> A boy will pace among the passionflowers,
> His eyes no longer two bruised surfaces.
> I'll know the mouth of my young groom, I'll touch
> His hands. Why do people lie to one another?

In the title poem, Thomas says, quite simply: *I am afraid of what the world will do.*

Lucie Brock-Broido
Cambridge, Massachusetts
November 2007

Letters to a Stranger

For my mother, 1912–1972
and my father, 1905–1972

Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both.

James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room

I

Waking Up

I

On my right is a field of darkness.
The ants are busy in the tall grass.
I float on a lake of dark petals.

II

Waves of flesh wash over me.
I am looking into watery sky
At the bottom of an ancient well.

III

The field is flooded with darkness.
I sleep in curls of dark grass
Edged by a cloud of wild asters.

IV

A horse stands by a worm-eaten log.
It paws the dark with its right foreleg,
Cutting dark flowers in the air.

Room 101

Chiseled out of the dark, I lie
Under the arclight. The moths steer
Clear of my eyelids. Sun hits the door
Open at morning. Every day
My mended arms grow stiff and lean.
I come to trade my flesh for stone.

Their eyes are kind as garnets. Nights,
I crouch under this yellow eye.
It is my private moon. I dry
And harden under icy sheets.
On Saturday I watched them take
My heart. Old relic, now you tick

All night beneath my tablelamp.
The hall is full of noise. Someone
Drags his cast-iron leg. I lean
Into my moon. A girl limps
On her new toes, without a crutch.
I listen to my father's watch

Clicking against my ribs. My nurse
Is frayed behind her spectacles.
She brings me needles, gauze, and pills
That fall like little unripe pears.
She brings a plaster paste to patch
My mouth. My new stone biceps itch.

I touch one granite ear, grown hard
And resonant as a conch. Light hurts
My eyes. I trade them both for quartz
On Wednesday morning. I am made
To last forever, girded bone.
A hornet tests my sculptured skin.

Carnations

The scent of carnations is too heady,
Too full of edges for me to climb to sleep.
The window's colors coil and unravel, snakes
Moving through smoke, flamily shedding their skeins.
Carnations are too pale for this faceted cut glass bowl.

Instead of all this permanence,
I would have preferred a bouquet of yellow flowers—
Buttercups perhaps, petals that might shrivel easily.
If you had wanted to ignite this room,
You should have settled for a honey jar,

Some crock shaped out of stone, with slender brushstrokes
Of pale blue buds, no other embellishment.
This bed with its sleek carved fauns disturbs me,
And looking into your eyes I see a pollen-dusted pond
Shaken with silver rings before the storm begins.

Hunting for Blueberries

Like two somnambulists we entered the dawn sun,
Its plumskin flashing. I squinted at its brightness.
The sky was colorless, merely a picked bone.
A few frayed clouds dissipated downfield.
You, my little cousin, eight years blind,

Guarded the lunch basket. Down at the horse pond, frogs
Regarded us below a layer of scum.
You cried and cried because I hugged you close
And would not let you go. In your shadow-peopled head
I must have been unwieldy as a python.

The mayflies had been three months dead,
But I could see them flickering in your eyes,
Those two gooseberries. I loved to lick them clean,
My tongue grazing the broken winter field
That was your only landscape, eight years old.

My hands were two large spiders that reached your bed
Each night; all day they picked blueberries
Out of the hidden thickets by the horse pond.
In that hard morning light, moonglow to you,
We might have been two trails of marsh vapor

Imperfectly matched, dissolving in the thickets.
You found blueberries in the oddest byways—
In a vein of the hill where harebells broke and faded,
Behind a clump of oaks that held the clouds up—
Plump globes the color of the evening sky,

Frosted with dust. What colors would leap
Out of the hedges! Your mother's arms,
Riddled with tiny punctures, needled blue,
Held nothing solid as these. Their blueblack juices
Stained your small mouth like watercolor.

We found a thicket dripping its liquors down.
Drunk on the fruit, a hornet threaded among them.
They plunked like raindrops in our coffee tin,
Each rain tap punctuated with a vibrant silence.
Sunflowers cluttered the grass with burnt-out tongues.

You knelt down in the leaves. And then I saw it—
I held you close again. Confused,
You pulled away from me and went on picking,
Unaware of the blacksnake coiled in the berries,
Its eyes clouded with sun, its face a death mask.

Head of Duck

My sister fears the brightness of the cleaver.
November brought a crippled wild duck
Up to our doorstep, out of rainy weather.
My father put him on the block and struck.

She sees him beat his wings again in dreams
That reach up out of the grimy winter dark
Into her shuttered bedroom. In our rooms
We curl into the frozen winter lake

And, waking, think of Mary Queen of Scots,
Of Julien Sorel, Medusa's head,
Louis XVI bleeding in the streets,
And Herod's eyes as John the Baptist bled.

No Music

In here, a name is unimportant.
You leave it behind you like a set of dentures.
It grows so far away from you it is impossible
To mouth its syllables with any kind of conviction.
It grows mild and faded as a row of stitches.

The dead have such sweet breath.
They are entirely indifferent to their surroundings,
Too wrapped up in themselves to notice anything—
A fly investigates the pearly knuckle.
Daylight withers, effacing its muscularity.

Children die with their hands stretched out,
Reaching for something they can recognize;
They move into the dusk without even thinking.
And the old fill their lungs with it like sleep
Or the tender odors of a burning field.

Flowers brighten the edges. You grow into yourself
Till it is difficult to imagine what you are thinking.
Hands folded for the occasion, you are nearly flawless.
They have shut your eyes so that their dark alarm
Flickers behind the two white lids.

Once, I stood alone in a solid wave,
Which took my entire body in its arms.
It wrapped me like a wave of terrible sleep.
Alone down there my skin grew thick as stone.
I sank. I could not breathe the stony air.

Now you bob on a surface of white flowers—
They stand still, but seem to drift in your direction.
They are white as the palm of a hand. They tell me nothing.
You lose color as they begin to mount the walls,
Gathering their stamina like a pale fungus.

It is impossible to move in all that white.
Your face is a blossom thickening to anonymity,
Erasing its features in a surge of downiness.
One dark hand buds and loses its distinction.
The light bruises and steps out of the room.

Old Woman Cleaning Silver

I polish the tarnished silverware
While pain manipulates my finger joints.
It is the kind of pain that comes
Out of the heavy silvers of the mirror
Or the white fields at the end of December.
It is a few perfect flakes of snow
When the season is just breaking.
They strike the water and are nothing at all.

Are my hands tarnishing?
I have hung the room with watercolors—
Sunflowers in a brown pitcher,
The horse at night in a field of red clover.
But the body's silvers begin to deepen
All at once. I have watched the metal darken
In the cold mirrors of my flesh.
My bruised surfaces are needles now.

The Turn of the Screw

She died. This was the way she died:
Headfirst, grazing the surface of the looking glass.
What did she see in there? The face of Judas?
Something escaped her, winnowing the darkness—
Her eyes fell open and her tongue exploded,
Troubling the silence with a rush of vowels.

Dear Father. It has rained for seven days.
A woman is taking shape out of the rain.
Sometimes I think she is my other self.
Her dress spills moth-dust on the landing.
What is the answer? Worms pulsing in a child's face?
A small face trapped forever in the mirror,
Somewhere behind the skull, in a narrow space?

He died. Even the cobblestones were ribbed with frost.
Now his face is staining the polished wardrobe.
His gaze is slippery as an eel—
It moves between me and the children's faces,
Swiveling in and out. His body splinters like the hoarfrost,
Releasing small white sparks that enter me.

Father . . . Surely I have not died. Lighting
The candles every night, I think of you.
There is a man. His eyes keep flickering
Among the dust-motes in the morning sunlight.
They watch me when I dress. Are they your eyes?
Is it decay I want? I see you moving in his face.
A world is crumbling in the children's eyes.

Flights and drops. The children are slowly dying.
They ride a little seesaw, up and down.
Perhaps they know that I am growing stronger.
I am going up. The pond is still as glass,
Bullfrogs are tuning their bassoons for autumn.
I pare each moment to a blade of sunlight. Father?

Hunting Rabbits in Cold Weather

I

I dream that I am blind all winter.
I wake, feeling my fingers begin to redden.
The needles of the pine are sheathed in ice.

II

The darkness that brings me out into the open
Moves with me over the cold hill
Like deep waters deadlocked under ice.

III

Out on the pond's surface I grow absentminded.
A thin powder of snow drifts over the ice
Like clouds moving blindly on a hard sky.

IV

I feel the snow falling in the beech wood
Where I have found the delicate prints of feet.
Clumsily, I upset a boughful of snow.

V

The woods are full of a silence.
I breathe a scrawl of ice in my own darkness
As my gun barks, putting the whole landscape to death.

The Moonstone

Who has the answer? Is it in the geranium pots,
Their little flares igniting the parlor walls?
Perhaps the stableboy has found it
In a crumbling haystack washed in drops of dew.
A filmy light moves in the eyes of horses
Whose backs are rippling in the morning vapors.

Caught in the pines, the moon is dull as pewter,
Its facets smudged with soot. A luminescence
Is loosening in a bed of gillyflowers;
A blade of frost has hooked their petals back.
The house is full of hands. Who is the thief?
Grandmotherly fingers move across a keyboard,
Peeling each spindly chord to skin and bone.

Who can resolve the puzzle? Limping Lucy?
Her body has stepped off a stained glass window,
No light behind it, flat and one dimensional.
The lady of the house is at her sewing—
Her eyes have raked the room, but they are searching
For flecks of brightness on a needle point.

Who has touched the stone? The family doctor?
Drugged all last night, his nether dreams
Were troubled with the heady scent of poppies,
Small ghosts that swiveled off. His mind has wed a blankness.
The guest in the white nightshirt . . . Is he the culprit?
He sleepwalks on the stairs, among the china teacups,
His body wavering in candlelight.

Morning has strung the grass with moony gems.
The witnesses breathe lightly, they are safe.
Where will they find the stone? At the Shivering Sand?
They will touch it in the country of their sleep.
Darkness is draining off. Here are the sun's patinas.
A day-moon tries its pulse and vanishes.

Jason

Leaving. The leaves relax, crusted brown,
Upset in the disoriented light.
Temples of gold front the afternoon.

I come in dryshod, in my mushroom-colored coat,
And lean a golden branch in the bronze vase.
I watch the impermanent green disintegrate.

Lobster-colored clouds merge and pass
On the arbor's dilapidated bones.
I raise my brush. Softly I release

A runnel of gold. Morning-glory vines
Strangle the canvas, quince goes up in smoke.
Mornings are smeared with a little fog, dead browns.

I paint the morning, its embroidered silk,
The sky's incertitudes, shut-off stars,
A few innocuous pods beginning to break.

I paint this room, the vase, strawbottom chairs,
The bedspread stitched with thin blue petals
Where I wake at dawn in a meadow of cornflowers.

I learn the lion color of these hills.
I am full of the old fear of coming home,
Stopping in darkness, under the maples.

I have sketched the soft orchard, the whorl of time.
A gold leaf skips over the hardwood floor,
And nobody minds what these dark things have become,

Fistfuls of brightness on clear water,
A handful of wafers when the season broke.
I dream of the innumerable antlers of winter,

The crude, unpainted branch. My mother and father
Walk, knee-deep in leaf of oak,
In a garden where it is always October.

II

Wooden Horse

All by myself I tied the braided rope
Around your gigantic neck, hoisting you
Over the garden wall. You are cold and steep:
A monolith of oak, an ice-built ship.
You contain the last gift. Embossed on your thick brow,

One carven whorl balances a star.
Wine-colored, adamant, you watch me run
Beneath your forelegs, brief as Gulliver.
Your sculptured mane, thick as a hill of fir,
Is wound with wooden fruit wiser than stone.

Your head is reared. I tap your heavy flanks
With a dry stick: you rumble like a shell
Casting its echo back. My spearhead sinks
Into your raftered belly's softer planks.
I scale one foreleg's knotty pinnacle.

Scrambling across thick withers overgrown
With oak sprouts, I approach the massive halter.
Bronze scales snap and click in a light rain;
Their cold patinas catch the cuticle moon
Which rocks in the stiff crook of your left ear.

I enter the frozen oracle of your mouth
Where swallows built a nest of wet broomstraws.
Your nostrils are a citadel for bees.
The air, stiffened to silver, vibrates with
An insect hum. I poke the angry hives.

Your time come round, the raw eyes deepening,
I share your difficult fountainhead of pain.
The indolent serpent coils in the sun.
Till now, the air was redolent with warning—
Emblems spilled from the mouth of Laocoön.

I no longer fear your secret, it is a gift.
With the alien blood flooding the tight vein,
Your eyes, once worked by sticks, contain the sun.
I find you laboring, the hoofprint soft,
No less familiar, in a wooden dawn.

The Bellringer

On summer nights the belfry shakes its tongues
Down Four Hills to the village square. Such winter sounds
Hollow the dream country of the villagers.
A pale insomniac with rutted eyes,
I track sleep out of time's intemperate blandishments.

Hours drizzling down to meet me, I lie on stone,
Eyes focused on the plum-colored moon,
Brittle as a wineglass on the sky's charred linen.
Visions rise up—my sister's bonewhite wrists,
My mother dungeoned in her crooked body.

Outside the church, dogs are rattling the ashcans
And crying like broken sirens at the moon's beaker.
I think of my body making its quick ascent,
Riding the bellrope an hour before Matins
When hoarfrost gloves my fingers to the knuckle.

Sleep paralyzes force. I pace the darkened arches.
The saints have been turning to stone for a long, long time—
They stand about disguised in masks of granite,
Their faces bland as swine or the sacred host.
Moonlight squanders its wine across their smiles.

Candles pinpoint the dark. I walk among them.
Erect and astonished, they are white as fingers.
No wind can snuff them out. They are Christ's ribs,
Spindly and interred here, waiting for the angel.
When I step forward, they lattice me with shadows.

Cobbles ring under my feet on the churchyard walk.
These white tablets aren't answering any questions.
Under the stones the sleepers lie in rows,
Arms folded in exhaustion, too deeply somnolent
For the moon to splinter them to shiny bits.

I hunch down, sleepless, crouching on the battlements.
Am I a victim of my own mortality?
Stars pulse and dissolve in their distant alleys
Above the face of a gargoyle, pinched and lifeless,
As if some bird had rifled its stone eyes.

Frog

Dear love, not for a moment, not at all,
Will I accept your kiss.
The water darkens. I am safe as a tadpole.

Wind shakes the water. I dine on August's last flies.
Leaves fall like paper soldiers
From their retreat in the thickets of the oak trees.

They clutter the pond's surface, flat little cadavers.
I view them from below,
Cold-blooded, serious. My arrowroot shivers.

Late June, my skin begins to toughen. How
My fingers ached!
Each knuckle formed a web. Suddenly my tongue grew

Sticky and hard. Regarding me from a silver-backed
Mirror, my eyes began
To deepen; both my thighs ballooned; I sucked

At the thick air. Now wind picks at my bones.
My voice is a creaking door.
I nibble this withered marigold, the sun.

I was not cut out to be a prince; I hear
Your voice, a china bell.
I would winter in mud, under these frozen stars,

Among the turtle shells. Dead lilies fill
My days, their mouths are red.
I breathe through duckweed as the owl calls

From his gable in the oak's dark leaves, dark blood.
Thin as any witch,
The moon comes up the hill in a stiff hood

Of gold. Rocking me in your palm, you scratch
My nose. A soft white bud,
My belly blossoms underneath your touch.

Sister Miriam Thérèse Takes the Veil

Painting marigolds in the public garden
When I was twelve and spring was a long way off,
I saw you the first time. My brush held silky filaments.
When you raised your face, I rummaged in the flowers,
Staining the paper gold. I saw answers in your eyes.
That night I woke to pain that twisted open,
Livid as beestings on my open palms.

I was the girl in the fairy tale,
Smothered in damaged leaves the birds brought down,
And where were you? Squirming on your cross
Among the chalices, the stiffened tallow.
Mornings, my beads turned into something else—
They cracked like eggs, loosing a horde of insects
That scraped their wings against my knucklebones.

Spring came. I washed my hair in icy water—
Dry, it was a counterpane of moonlight,
Holding a milky sheen. I set the candles out
And watched a crocus pierce the frosty garden.
I steeled my body for a crucifixion,
Death in the morning. Was it your death I wanted?
Or my own body ringing in the dark?

Later that week, we eased you off the cross,
Dead as a stick, yet every vein was humming.
I wanted to crawl inside your broken flesh
And lose myself in all that frantic music.
We rubbed your thighs with musk. Your face stayed frozen.
I pressed my lips against your open palm,
Tasting the clouded-over April morning.

Today they cut my hair. It fell like loops of sunlight.
Now there's a stranger in the looking glass,
Sallow and lizardy, with enormous eyes
That hold a small, indelible pietà.
This morning I am spinning back to you.
In the season of brown leaves I'll take the wedding band,
Its quick gold vise welding me to nothing.

Luncheon with the Hangman

I remember the field of snow
Where I cut the throat of the servant girl.
I left her in that rumpled meadow.

Negligence became habitual.
I grew accustomed to vulnerability.
After the minor fractures of April,

Slow convalescence, a montage of sky.
The village clock, punctual as a cricket,
Tapped the penetrable gray

I mistook for sheep, a woolly light.
I decapitated the schoolmarm after a light supper
And left her head on a salad plate.

You tell me surrender is unconditional.
Lead me to the marketplace full of this good beer.
I'll swing like the tongue of a bell.

Dragging the Lake

They are skimming the lake with wooden hooks.
Where the oak throws its handful of shadows
Children are gathering fireflies.
I wait in the deep olive flux
As their cries ricochet out of the dark.
Lights spear the water. I hear the oak speak.

It foists its mouthful of sibilants
On a sky involved with a stillborn moon,
On the stock-still cottages. I lean
Into the dark. On tiny splints,
One trellised rose is folding back
Its shawls. The beacon strikes the lake.

Rowboats bob on the thick dark
Over my head. My fingers wave
Goodbye, remember me. I love
This cold, these captive stars. I shake
My blanket of shadows. I breathe in:
Dark replenishes my two wineskins.

My eyes are huge, two washed-out mollusks.
Oars fall, a shower of violet spray.
When will my hosts deliver me,
Tearing me with their wooden hooks?
Lights flicker where my live heart kicked.
I taste pine gum, they have me hooked.

They reel me in, a displaced anchor.
The cygnets scatter. I rise, I nod,
Wrapped in a jacket of dark weed.
I dangle, I am growing pure,
I fester on this wooden prong.
An angry nail is in my tongue.

Snakebite

Now I am getting light as cotton candy—
Out of the two red holes in my heel
Infinity pours, goodbye to all of me.
It was pleasant to watch my leg begin to swell;
An incredible headiness washed over me,
I didn't feel a thing. The color of a bluebottle,

The sky hit my skin like water from a pitcher.
I remember only a limber brown stick
Without any fangs, then the cool white stretcher
Where I became part of an unamusing joke
And the sun became a singular gold adder,
Which gathered its constricted shape and struck.

First I dream of wool, and then of water,
The bridge gone out under my footsoles.
Sleep eddies under everything pure as a colt's star.
These ladies in white speak a mouthful of bells.
They let the sleep rush out of me like air
Out of an innertube, smudging their white walls.

Watching milady through the wrong end of the telescope,
I suck the glass pencil at noonday.
Here is a pale horse, they say; this is his stirrup.
I ride on my own diminishing. I grow gray
In the mild contagion of my sleep.
The light spreads its thin skin and grows muddy.

They feed me through tubes and comfort me with needles.
Where are the nubile, white-winged ladies
Who populate these immaculate halls?
The young men who view me have sulphur-blue jaws
That do not complain. They bring me bottles
Of adamant, they move quietly as butterflies

And are upon me when I least expect it.
Everything I leave behind is ubiquitous,
Even the undependable broad daylight
Which grows thinner each time I raise my eyes
To watch the centuries stream from my foot
And the whole world rock backward into place.

The Stableboy

At night I have a dream. The same dream
Swims back, and I am riding through tall grass
With pearls of dew clear as the glass of wine

On my father's table every Christmas Eve.
I plummet through the dark, the phantom horse
Pulsing beneath me. I am dying into that dream.

I wake in stale hay, the breath of horses
Carving slow plumes that ravel up like smoke
Where spiders leave their snarled fortresses.

Last year, when I was six, the barn caught fire.
The moon cast prisms on the snow. I was asleep.
A crackle shook my head out of the dark.

The hay was quick with thin red tongues
Babbling together, shredding all the silence—
Outdoors, the folds of snow were smooth and speechless.

Pippin was crying. Her mane was red as bittersweet.
Brightness was lapping at the sorrel's withers.
An inflammation lit the frosty rafters.

Dapple was moaning. My sleeve caught fire.
Flames licked Carlotta's legs until she screamed.
My father lifted me into his arms . . .

Nights now, I sleep among the rusty spades,
Bones of horses sweetening the August night.
My head is full of objects—lean, charred rafters,

And then the dream begins. The horse is saddled, waiting.
Trembling, I look into its eyes and see
A city burning on a winter night.

Iron Maiden

The door shuts by itself. And then you lose your face.
It shrivels from you like a nuptial kiss,
A ripe fig puckering. Once you're inside,
You can't escape or grope to find the bone-mask
Your father wore. It blooms with age. One day
Someone will touch it like a family heirloom.

You do not die at all, you merely thrive
On suffocation. It's a benediction.
The iron fangs shine like an edge of sunlight.
They pin you down like an exotic moth,
Suffusing every muscle with importance.
Your body drops small bits of phosphorescence:

You'll find yourself knee-deep in it
Before you learn to blink or bend a wrist—
Thick as hate, it lights your privacy,
Cleansing your pierced lungs, your ruptured tendons.
Your heart grows flat and white, a scoured saucer,
No longer sticky and intractable.

Your veins contain a lakeful of bright fluid—
Breathe, and you'll drown or vanish in its ichors
Or hang suspended like a bottled fetus.
Nothing is lost for good. Bad dreams swim back
Swaddled in bands of gauze, like cat mummies.
They shift about, a personal constellation.

And what of the brain, the love seat?
It will be shattered also, like a fragile instrument,
Its complicated networks shorted out.
Shut in its iron skull, the brain will prosper.
It will be milkweed seed, a small effulgence
Trapped though its seeds take wing, its shell crack open.

Dissecting a Pig

I

I have kept you in a laboratory jar
Comfortable as the château of your mother.
Blind, you squinted at me from the shelf
For two whole days,
And then I hoisted you, knuckles and all,
Out of your glassed-in belly.

I delivered you into the hard light
Clean as a son of God.

II

One day, your eyes slammed shut like doors.
You were the one that never went to market.
Your snout is moon-colored. I remember the time
I watched a sow get butchered.
She screamed like a woman in labor.
I couldn't look away.

Her heart kept right on pumping its bruised pistons;
The cut throat sent a jet of red to the ceiling.

III

The sun ricochets off my scalpel
As I open your throat.
I slice you like a ham,
Inching meticulously across your belly.
You take it all in stride;
You do not even smile.

You are a strongbox broken open. Suddenly
I am aware of your valuable possessions.

IV

Someone has filled your veins with plastic
So that you do not bleed or make a sound.
Your lungs have given out
Like two deflated life preservers.
You are full of a silence.
I move about you almost reverently.

You were baptized in formaldehyde
Before I brought you to this strange autopsy.

V

Here is your heart, fished out of the wreckage,
Inflated, mapped with ink-blue arteries,
And not at all as dreadful as I imagined.
I will hang it on a silver chain
And wear it under my clothing like an amulet
Of humming muscle, like a crucifix.

It will tap my ribs in secret for a month
Before it turns into a thin black angel.

III

Wild Cherries

Beyond the cemetery fence bodies are shattered
On the public highway when the snow dissolves—
All at once their bones are packed with light,
And birds come down to shake the fledgling leaves.
I know nothing of these deaths, except the stillness
That flowers over everything the moment after.

My friend and I have shared these silences
Though we are not part of them,
Not yet. We feed on our own loneliness,
Taking what the moment hands us, nothing more.
June fastens everything in a silk repose.
Lilacs have dropped their stars with little effort.

Nuns lie under these plain stone markers.
Asleep in their long rows, whitely established
In the center of a hunger that was never theirs,
They do no blossoming; it is impossible
To think of their bodies flaking into scars.
Pale as tapers, they don't rise after dark.

Edging the cemetery fence where dusk is gathering
Its broken strands, branches of wild cherries
Bend to our fingertips. You reach for them.
Your hands are gloved in shadow—
The red juice stains your palms
As if a nail were driven into their hollows.

I watch you eat, tasting yourself perhaps,
Some bitterness that is a part of you,
And I accept it gratefully. When you smile,
I see you dying in that single instant.
Walking back home, into ourselves, we enter
A far-off country neither of us wanted.

The Hostage

When I step out, sun cuts me like a razor,
Edging into this steep place of branches.
I trudge to a hillside where there are only dandelions
And sheep coming unstuffed like ancient cushions.
I blink and look about: no room for miracles here.
The sky is a pale gray slate with chalky smudges.

But in a vein of the hill where last year's weeds
Have starved themselves to death and only chickweed
Flowers in the broken stones, I find a car
Wedged in the bracken. A few slender feathers
Ride up and vanish. In a briarpatch of skeletons
The engine purrs in the center of the wreckage.

I step into a field of weeds so deep
It is like wading into brackish water
Yellowed with pondscum and gold filaments
That have dislodged themselves out of a brittle sky,
Out of its steely vapors. The chrome bumper gleams
And fades, fastened in its nest of rubble.

Leafshadows flicker on the damaged hood,
Reflecting bits of light. A bird might take it for another world
And perish in these reflections. I strain forward—
A boy lies broken in the driver's seat,
Broken but not extinguished, for his body holds a silence
Like the fierce moment after a match is kindled.

Why isn't he aflame? Surely his arms have turned
To wings by now, wings flaking into cinders,
His body growing slender as a fawn's.
A purple flower is clinging to the windshield,
But it is broken also. A petal slides down the glass
And flutters like a tiny, vibrant tongue.

Behind the glass his face is mottled in shadow.
The prints of leaves have stained his arms.
He lies shoulder-deep in a pool of amber shadows
Whose ripples spread and pull their thin skeins back.
I would like to wash my hands in all that darkness.
I open the door. A needle of sun intrudes.

Is this what it is to be broken? To be moored in shadow?
A gravelly echo of sheep rivets me here.
I bend to him and take him by the shoulders
But not a thing inside him will ignite,
So I take his slender wings into my arms
And say: Where has your first dream vanished now? Your dream.

The Poinsettias

I have grown accustomed to the pallors of stone.
The scalloped, tissuepaper sheath disclosed
Brightness like an inflammation.

They packed me off to blackness, sleep-crazed,
Riding an armory of potent needles
Toward a dark I hardly recognized.

A clear balloon, the intravenous bottle
Bobs on its rubber string, nursing
The sting under my skin. Death-rattle,

Whimper, sob, and whine vibrate along
The corridor walls. The poinsettia petals flare,
Each a forked red tongue.

Hell is a blue light. The devil's granddaughter
Turns me on the rotisserie,
Broiling my juices to a vapor.

Light returns, a punctual mist crowding the eye.
Infection stews in a region behind my eyelids.
My veins bloom blue as the sky.

My belly stitched with a tough black thread,
I am snug as a turkey. Love is a wound that will happen.
Veteran ragdoll with split sides,

A woman coughs her stiches open
Across the hall. I count the four brown prongs
Of a crucifix. Bright petals deepen,

Collapsing on the bureau top. The dinnerbell rings,
All whiteness. I am the virgin bridegroom, white,
Chastened by these hot tongues.

The birch outside my window, in a snowy light,
Stands in a waist-high drift, austere, complete,
Essential as the edge of sleet.

Wine

I have bottles to kill.

The glass is not a ruby:
It is a mouth in itself,
Emptying its waters into me.
Its good juices wander to my heart,
Making me grow.
They put me to sleep,
Firm as a river of forgetfulness,
Kissing me sweetly into the sheets.

It is the tongue of Mary.
She is red like everything else,
Clinging lovingly to her humanity,
Fingering my hair and murmuring of tenderness.
It is like swallowing an aphrodisiac
Or stepping into a bad dream.
The infections of spring
Fasten to my mouth.
This is the time of gentleness, a flowering of organs.
I am prisoner of my own sweet juices.

Oh, Christ, you are so very far away.
Your hands are full of broken glass,
And I am too small to measure your imperfect gifts.

I drink from your slender veins.
You are falling water.
I suck at your throat,
Stroking the tender blossoms of your hands.

Your wrists flower red,
And I wrap you like an expensive garment.
I am buried with you under the hill of olives.
I sleep in your torn flesh,
In the white garments of your humility.

The moon hangs like a fruit,
A heart, transplanted, that has stopped
In the middle of love.
The branches move just outside my window,
Perforated with their simple blossoms.

Longing for Death

I stepped out of my car door, into the black,
Searching for the rag ends of some dream.
Aware that sort of thing is useless,

I went out looking for some imperfect child
Propped on its own crooked bones
Like a set of terrible crutches.

I walked out hoping to evade redemption,
The life I wanted to lose so badly
Like an old wallet, a letter of introduction.

It is easy to surrender to the point of a needle:
It is like lying down to love
With the smell of August rubbed into your skin;

It is like swallowing your tongue,
Or learning to love that tube that nurses you
Through the monotonous afternoons of snowfall.

I wanted to marry an absence,
The sound of stars crumbling without any malice
In a corner of the universe,

The raw meat of a personal wound.
I wanted to be the witch's boy
Who helps the captive children to escape.

Instead, I managed to come face to face
With the first stretchings of a spring I never asked for,
A used-up landscape twitching its nerve ends.

I touched a branch of tiny desires
Stretching their coppery buds over a sky
Grown white and vacuous as a startled face.

I stroked a branch moving in its own life
Like the crutch of some deformed child
Breaking suddenly with improbable blossoms.

I walked into a field grown tense with longing,
Riveted with the potent needles of rain.
I stepped into a flooded meadow

Where blue flowers swayed into the open
Like a poem spoken out of damaged lungs,
An iteration, into the air I did not want.

Laceration

I didn't want you. I wanted to be left alone,
Letting the daylight wash across the walls
Like lake water on a beach in the morning light.
I wanted to touch my stitches like a broken ladder
Or a mouth much too convulsed to speak.
Now you speak. And my wound ticks like a clock,

Getting rid of another hour,
Strangling it like a hired assassin.
You say you love me. It is no use.
Two days ago they fed me through a tube
That held me like a huge umbilical cord.
It fastened to my arm like God,

Nagging for repentance, begging for my personal guilt.
I might as well surrender to my body,
Its million tight veins wrapping me like a net.
I am too full of my own poisons
To be swallowed by anybody's love.
I wake. Infection paces at my boundaries.

I have been cut, ripped open, and I have a scar
That speaks for itself in eleven different languages.
Desire flows from it like a thick sap
At the end of an intolerable season;
And lust wells out of it. They bring me the mirror—
I am thin and unshaven and even a little handsome.

At last I can be entirely indifferent.
In this bed, surrounded by the essential seraphim,
I can ignore the obvious, I can be cruel even.
I wait for sleep, for the flash of the needle,
And the pain and the forgetfulness,
Light melting on the bowl of blue flowers at my bedside.

I do not even ask for darkness any more.
I let the nurses touch me with their cool hands
Like lake waves on an empty beach at dawn.
I will wait here, there is nothing I can do,
As the entire lake begins its movement toward me,
And let the waters claim me like a touch.

The Chestnut Branch

There is something to be said for darkness
After all. My mother's hands
Have been full of the dark all winter.

They are hollow boats not going anyplace.
They only pull the blinds
Or gesticulate at some ineradicable star.

Now the backyard unfolds its lacy pleats,
And I bring in a white branch
Because love is the lesson for tomorrow.

Will nothing cure the brightness in these streets?
A million strange petals touch
The panes. Is it a gift of snow?

Is it making up for lack of bandages?
Is it cold, is it hot—
Will it keep, should we put it on ice?

Should my sister sew it into bridal clothes?
Is it lingerie, or just a sheet
To pull across a used-up face?

Will it brighten up the arms of chairs?
It moves. It hurts my eyes.
I am not accustomed to so much light.

It is like waking after twenty years
To find your wife gone and the trees
Too big, strange white growths that flank the street.

I will stand it in the window like a beacon—
I will find it among rubble,
Still shining after years and years of exile.

I'll place it on a casket like a bunch of carnations,
Or ring it like a dead bell.
I'll wear it like a prefabricated smile.

It will enlarge; I will set the clock
By it and watch each leaf,
Each petal make something gigantic:

Tomorrow it will bud and break—
It will build itself
A town where everyone has died of hunger.

Lambs

Under branches of white lilac
They crop the wet grass just before dawn.
They move smokily through the half-light, smudge pots
Pulsing against a thick morning frost.
My watch glows like a small, improbable moon. Six o'clock.
I have been driving into the dark too long.

I pull to the side of the road.
I am a branch, a stone. The lambs are not aware of me.
They have been fading into the hillside
Like shadows that have peopled someone's fever
In the shut room of a dilapidated farmhouse
Where the walls reiterate a spray of honeysuckle.

They ignore one another. They are blanketed with thistles,
A little out of sorts in this shabby light.
Five or six of them are wandering through a peach orchard,
Not even aware of my personal squalor.
What stumbles from their tongues is never music;
It is the echo of a badly damaged shell.

Now they are moving by a ditch full of rainwater,
Inspected for flaws in the foggy mirror.
I walk into the field, I am not afraid of them—
They scatter like the last edges of a sickness.
The sun has begun to enlarge its tawny fleeces
At the expense of no one in particular.

Peonies

I

My nephew has brought in an armload of peonies.
They are arranging themselves in a green jar
And shatter like expensive glass

Over an inch of cold tapwater.
They spring from a source of pure darkness,
Telling me nothing of what they are.

They are not a world, they are not a looking glass
Ignorant of confession. They have no voice.
Colored with terrible innocence,

White, pink, their essences break loose,
Dispensing darkness over my mother's buffet.
They breathe. They are occupants of the house

Large enough to die or start a fire,
Leaning toward the dimly lighted sky's
Insinuations, rumor of sapphire.

II

Look how light is settling. One leaf browns.
Fold after fold of brightness
Breaks out of their icy dimensions.

It spreads. It is dimensionless—
Flake after flake, it separates like a cry.
This is the skein of winter. It has no face.

It is all white edges just beginning to gray.
It is the color of a dandelion field,
Broken fleeces, a clutter of pale shadow,

Particles at the foot of a deathbed
Gathering for a celebration.
Blossoms of snow, gigantic flakes of cold

Are flattening in the summer sunlight.
Their light pastels disintegrate in motion,
Drowning. This is the deadman's float.

III

All this red is frightening. The room is livid.
It is like opening an artery.
One tight sphere gets ready to explode—

Scarlet splatters over the buffet.
The air is wild with commotion,
My peaked wallpaper is getting ruddy.

They are opening nine torches of acetylene
Burning their way toward ultimate possession.
I am not decadent or made of stone,

I am merely part of a conflagration—
No cry, no witness but a cinder,
My body erects itself in motion

Borne lovingly out of another time,
Another place. The peonies bloom like a cancer
Eating the heart out of this room.

Going Back

Yes, I have known something of the dark you speak of.
I do not even remember any more
What it is like to be entirely forgetful.

I knew once. That was before the day my sister married
And I crawled into the belly of the coal bin
To water the dark with my astonishment.

Now all I can do is lend my ear to rumors,
The sun bloated, coming out of extinction, swollen
Like a tumor over the unfamiliar landscape.

I will admit I am the product of a war,
Two-sided like any other, pumped up
Out of proportion, a blood feud for that matter.

On one side is the face of my dead aunt.
Where did she go after swallowing the disinfectant
Bought to scour out the bowels of the house?

Now she is whispering at my ear, a delectable language
Poured into my head like sweet oil.
She speaks of that dark peninsula

I tried to swallow whole once,
Driving it into my body's rivers
With the hammer of my determination.

She went out of her head with pain,
Straining to deliver an empty statement
Over the white pages of the bedroom.

On the other side is an insane uncle,
Hands cupping his ears, listening for destruction,
And a great aunt who went mad on diabetes.

She gathers together again in a photograph,
A nurse in Panama wearing her white defiantly.
Those eyes drove one man to suicide

One hot night. Death whined in his ear
Like a terrible mosquito, like the yellow sickness,
A huge gold sun bulging behind his eyelids.

All this still gallops through my veins.
I have even kept something of it in my bones—
The shape of their nose, their firmly tilted jaw.

How they reached the vanishing point I do not remember.
There is no way to get back
Through this long succession of addicts

Whose guilt is my inheritance.
You have noticed I am heir to the old decisions.
No one contests the sum of such a legacy.

Two Aunts

When I feel the old hunger coming on,
I think of my two great-aunts,
A farmer's daughters,
Speaking into the dusk in North Dakota.
I imagine the dark baron
Riding out of their mouths,
Thick-skinned and girded
Against disaster, swathed
In cuirass and chainmail and a curse.
My hunger was theirs
Too long ago. It swims in my blood,
Groping for a foothold.
It is the dark I thrust my tongue against,
The wine and the delicate symphony
That makes my head tick so exquisitely
Tonight. My ladies,
My dusky girls, I see you
With your bustles puffed up like life preservers,
Your needlepoint rose garden,
Your George Eliot coiffures,
Your flounces gathered like an 1890s valentine.
You both took heroin.
Your father never noticed.
You sprinkled it on your oatmeal,
Embroidered doilies with it,
Ate it like a last supper
At midnight. I know what you meant.
There was always the hunger,
The death of small things
Somewhere in your body,

The children that would never
Take place in either of you.
You were a garden of lost letters.
A lust inhabited your veins.
My addicts,
The village spoke of you.
Under your parasols, two rose windows,
The world swam with color.
Riding the monotonous hills at daybreak,
You escaped the indecisions
Your blood has handed down
To me. You rode your father's spotted horses
As if they might have ferried you
Over an edge, a dark mouth in the distance.
I see you ride the black hills of my mind,
Sidesaddle, gowned in lemon silk,
Galloping
In your laced-up flesh, completely unaware
Of something I inherited,
The doubt,
The fear,
The needle point of speech,
The hunger you passed down that I
Possess.

IV

Magdalene in the Garden

Vessel of seven devils, I spun dreams
Out of my body's chill, its raggedness—
Where is my golden child? He steps on air,
Plummeting into grayness, the sharp distances.
The pomegranate builds a flimsy steeple,
Collapsing in the odors of this garden;
The petals wrinkle underneath my feet.
Dampness is winding me in tender scarves.

Is the flesh only a temple, or a place of bones
Where nothing solid is annihilated?
Once my body was a nest of serpents,
A sanctuary for the lame, the broken—
Love snapped those brittle turnings; all their edges
Left me for something that would nourish them.
Your hand closed on my wrist, a silver bracelet
Holding a single stone with soft blue veins.

The temple bells unloose their heavy tongues
Through mild air the color of a turquoise.
Stars eat the dark. They seem to coil inward,
Regarding me with pity, or a malice
I cannot grasp or press against my cheek.
Is the world I look for trapped forever
Behind the sky's stretched fabric,
Its silkiness a mask for my desire?

Light fleshed your body that last morning.
The garden budded. You were its first light.
Now I see you in the faces of small animals—
The worn face of the lizard hunched on stone,
Its body strung with dewdrops. In the marketplace
Honeycombs contain a tribe of angels—
The search for heaven in the swart red petals
That pierce my afternoons with quiet longing.

Tonight I think my body is a lake
Where stars drop gently and efface their lusters.
In me, they turn to stone or small, blank seraphim.
Before you left I saw you in a dream.
Fumes hurried from the cave hole. You were one person.
My silks were calm as wine in an old cup,
But I could see, reflected in your eyes,
The chalice of the pomegranate flower.

In the Emergency Ward

I have to let you go now.
I'll wait here while they try to patch you.
I want you to know
That I have been storing up wounds also.
There is nothing to it.
But it is clear that there is no remedy
For this kind of pain.
They could not reach it with all their hands.

You see, they can only prod your lovely body
With their believable knives
Or needle you shut like good leather.
Sometimes they even recommend
A long, fine pin to hold your bones upright
Or the stout metal box
That makes your lungs purr like a motor.

As I watch you go in,
I want to stand in a field of wheat
Where the sun is breaking into flower
And feel the delicate grains blowing
Across my ankles
Just as the combine heads my way.

But my body is full of dark roads
Where it is impossible
For the last drunken derelict inside of me
To find himself.
Now he is reeling by a ditch of muddy water,
And I am afraid of his terrible vertigo.

Here in the emergency ward
Everything is different.
The wounds of hurt children
Heal with a kind of vengeance.
I have watched the dark eyes of a scalded baby
Grow astonishingly blue
Right in the arms of its mother.

But now you are coming back to me,
And I see clearly that nothing is impossible.
They are carrying your body, lapped in musky leaves.
Into an ancient room
Where the stone walls sweat continually
And a fly gets lost in the alleys of your head.

Saint Francis among the Hawks

The world revolves inside the eye of the hawk.
It is a looking glass. The sky is pale and hesitant.
Birds pivot in its blues like windblown napkins.
I am a fountain. Salt pours from my lips,
Bitter and sulphurous, igniting the winter landscape.
Inside the hawk's eye I am thin and ragged—
The dawn light fractures me to pieces.
I am eaten up, dissolving like a star.
The first sharp chord twitches below my ribs,
And then I enter the body of the hawk.

I feel my pulses surging upward,
Launching themselves into the morning wind—
I taste the gouts of sunlight, hone the air
To tiny particles of iridescence.
Christ is an instrument in my left side.
Its strings nag at my flesh. They manufacture
A symphony enormous as the ocean.
Giddy, I wheel above the frozen world,
Drunk on the music drumming through my rib cage,
Trapped in the sleek black eyes, the slippery feathers.

One morning, before dawn, I saw a hawk
Carry a field mouse into the sky.
The tassels of the weeds were splashed with frost.
Below the washed-out stars, I heard the mouse
Crying to the talons in its back,
But all I saw was brightness, a light flashing
Out of the shabby feathers of the hawk,
And then the mouse tumbled out of the sky.
At dawn, I found it in a frosty thicket,
Its body writhing on the cold white nettles.

Cold August

When two white bodies shake a room with silence,
The clock utters a trembling that deceives
The chambers of the head, the shuttered heart.
The window holds an arid breath of leaves.

They slowly taste the sharp blue bittersweetness
That breaks the body's strength. The crumbling walls
Stiffen above their desperate tenderness
As frantically before the first leaf falls

They clasp their pale hands. The fierce blue skies
Tighten within their eyes, a cold wind streams
From breath to breath. Within their silence lies
The cindered chill of intricate blue dreams.

The wind swings in and flattens on the glass,
And in the room the thick light seems too much
For their white hands, which rise and meet and pass
Like wings against the summer light. They touch.

But soon their footsteps break across the doorway,
Leaving the clock behind. They shape no words,
But force their eyes into the vicious day
Against the sudden flight of hungry birds.

Love Song

Love, the gold mouth has broken open.
Stars are hard as quartz.
The moon hangs like a half-eaten melon.

The veined hives bleed in little spurts,
Then thicken. Lambskins whiten
In blue weather. I said the fountain starts

Again, sun spreads, thick and molten,
Up the hospital stairs:
The sun is merely a hot eye; it stiffens

The jaws of the dead, riding out of here
In their shut cars. The morning papers
Keep the paralytics in their strawbottom chairs.

The distance is full of grasshoppers,
Dog-eared poems, soot
Blossomed like frost, bruised plums, and old beekeepers.

On the stonebuilt gallery, through late
White buds and pain,
The newest amputee has learned by heart

His wife's last letter, brand-new lines
For an old play. His stump
Echoes calf, ankle, foot. The butchered bone

Is a wry flute. A boy limps
In his thick, plaster chest,
Armor against the enemy, the stamp

Of alien hooves. They bring him mossed
Brown jars that ferry late
Chrysanthemums on floods of amethyst.

Tonight a little girl lies shut
In the west wing. Bridelike,
She curls in her white nest for the long wait,

Victim of the poison apple. Stroke
On yellow stroke, the leaves
Splatter across her windowsill. The black

Tongue is ripening. The oak's little gloves
Assault your perfect sleep,
Queen bee, poppy, fragilest of wives.

Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh
XXI Dynasty

My body holds its shape. The genius is intact.
Will I return to Thebes? In that lost country
The eucalyptus trees have turned to stone.
Once, branches nudged me, dropping swollen blossoms,
And passionflowers lit my father's garden.
Is it still there, that place of mottled shadow,
The scarlet flowers breathing in the darkness?

I remember how I died. It was so simple!
One morning the garden faded. My face blacked out.
On my left side they made the first incision.
They washed my heart and liver in palm wine—
My lungs were two dark fruit they stuffed with spices.
They smeared my innards with a sticky unguent
And sealed them in a crock of alabaster.

My brain was next. A pointed instrument
Hooked it through my nostrils, strand by strand.
A voice swayed over me. I paid no notice.
For weeks my body swam in sweet perfume.
I came out scoured. I was skin and bone.
They lifted me into the sun again
And packed my empty skull with cinnamon.

They slit my toes; a razor gashed my fingertips.
Stitched shut at last, my limbs were chaste and valuable,
Stuffed with paste of cloves and wild honey.
My eyes were empty, so they filled them up,
Inserting little nuggets of obsidian.
A basalt scarab wedged between my breasts
Replaced the tinny music of my heart.

Hands touched my sutures. I was so important!
They oiled my pores, rubbing a fragrance in.
An amber gum oozed down to soothe my temples.
I wanted to sit up. My skin was luminous,
Frail as the shadow of an emerald.
Before I learned to love myself too much,
My body wound itself in spools of linen.

Shut in my painted box, I am a precious object.
I wear a wooden mask. These are my eyelids,
Two flakes of bronze, and here is my new mouth,
Chiseled with care, guarding its ruby facets.
I will last forever. I am not impatient—
My skin will wait to greet its old complexions.
I'll lie here till the world swims back again.

When I come home the garden will be budding,
White petals breaking open, clusters of night flowers,
The far-off music of a tambourine.
A boy will pace among the passionflowers,
His eyes no longer two bruised surfaces.
I'll know the mouth of my young groom, I'll touch
His hands. Why do people lie to one another?

Letter to a Mute

If I could reach you now, in any way
At all, I would say this to you:
This afternoon I walked into a thicket

Of gold flowers that had no idea
What they were after. They couldn't hear a thing.
I walked among a million small, deaf ears

Breaking their gold into the afternoon.
I think they were like you, golden, golden,
Unable to express a single thing.

I walked among them, thinking of you,
Thinking of what it would be like
To be completely solitary. Once I was alone like that.

All the field was humming, brimming
With some brazen kind of song, and I
Thought that somehow I could disappear

Into the empty hall of your right ear,
Wandering through the slender bones of you.
But I knew that I could never let you know

That it is late summer here, that I
Can hear the crickets every evening
Hollowing out the darkness at my window,

That you have vanished into a dark tunnel
Where I have tried to reach you with my mouth
Till my mouth ran gold, spilling over everything.

Tonight I looked into your face, tenderly,
Tenderly, but I can never find you there.
I can only touch your quiet lips.

If I could stick my pen into your tongue,
Making it run with gold, making
It speak entirely to me, letting the truth

Slide out of it, I could not be alone.
I wouldn't even touch you, for I know
How you are locked away from me forever.

Tonight I go out looking for you everywhere
As the moon slips out, a slender petal
Offering all its gold to me for nothing.

Letters to a Stranger

I

In April we will pierce his body.
It is March. Snow is dust over the branches.
A pony hunches in the orchard.
I stand at the frozen mouth of the river,
Thinking of you.
In the house where you live
Frost glitters on the windows
Like uncounted pieces of silver.
Already they are preparing the wine and the bread.

II

The field is banked with purple asters
And a spill of mustard flowers.
The earth has taken on terrible proportions.
Out in an unused meadow
The wildflowers have already covered
The delicate bones of an Indian.
Bees are flying across the meadow
To a hive under the rafters of the barn.
Someone is leading a horse with crippled bones
Into the spikes of clover.

III

Alexander died this morning,
Leaving his worldly possessions
To the strongest.
I watched an empire fade across his lips.

They propped him in the sun a while,
And then three women came to scour his body
Like a continent.
I am afraid of what the world will do.
Only this afternoon
I heard two worms conversing
In the shadow of his breastbone.
I slipped out of the palace
And entered a vein of gillyflowers
On the edge of potter's field.
I will not be missed.
No one even noticed.

IV

I have been thinking of the son
I would like to have.
The leaves have all gone yellow
Overnight, wrinkling like hands
In the updraught.
I drove my car by the creek
Because I had nowhere else to go.
The milkweed's delicate closet had been fractured,
Filling the air with rumors.
Despite all I could do, the sumac
Had taken on the color of a mouth.
Tonight, I perceive the young girls
In my mother's blood
Letting their seed pass by unnoticed,
A red nativity.

V

Last night they dragged the canal
For an old man's body.
Now he is singing for a hook
Just below water level.
A branch of ice is splitting open
Across each window,
And snow is dismantling the weeds
Like the breakable furniture of a boudoir.
I have been rereading your letters.
It is too cold for a virgin birth to occur
Even in the frosty suburbs
Of a wildflower.

VI

I have learned to camouflage myself in church,
Masking my body
With the body of a saint.
Last night frost glazed the face of Mary Magdalene,
And snow rode up to the altar windows.
Before morning, the sparrows came down
To the body of Saint Francis.
Now he is upholstered in oak leaves
Like a living room chair.
This morning we are preparing a crucifixion.
I am thinking of you now.
With the velvet at my knees
And the silverware shining on the altar
And the stained glass moving out of focus

And the cross veiled in black,
I am present for the news of an enormous death.
I take the bread on my tongue
Like one of Christ's fingers,
And the wine rides through my breast
Like a dark hearse.
All the while I am thinking of you.
An avalanche of white carnations
Is drifting across your voice
As it drifts across the voices of confession.
But the snow keeps whispering of you over and over.

Reasons

For our own private reasons
We live in each other for an hour.
Stranger, I take your body and its seasons,
Aware the moon has gone a little sour

For us. The moon hangs up there like a stone
Shaken out of its proper setting.
We lie down in each other. We lie down alone
And watch the moon's flawed marble getting

Out of hand. What are the dead doing tonight?
The padlocks of their tongues embrace the black,
Each syllable locked in place, tucked out of sight.
Even this moon could never pull them back,

Even if it held them in its arms
And weighed them down with stones,
Took them entirely on their own terms
And piled the orchard's blossom on their bones.

I am aware of your body and its dangers.
I spread my cloak for you in leafy weather
Where other fugitives and other strangers
Will put their mouths together.

Uncollected Poems

Rural Winter

The mailbox is frozen tight
Where fingers stick. The snow is cut
With grooves snowed over in the night.
The tall barn door is shut.

The pigeons gather in the loft
And plunge their bills beneath warm wings.
Brown birds leave tracks where snow is soft,
And nothing ever sings.

The swallows, if the pine trees shake
Their mantles down, soar high and glide
With gusts of stinging wind that make
It good to get inside.

The dog, warm in the fire's glow,
Looks wistful now and cocks his head
Like some small boy who owns the snow
Outside, but has no sled.

Dragon's Teeth

March is broken pottery. April is papier-mâché.
I walk in a dark welter
Of leaves. Morning fog is defining a sky

Splashed easily over the meadow's serious watercolor.
There are no edges here.
Plum petals float in the wooden tub of rainwater

That was once a block of ice, ready for sculpture,
In the January frost-flood.
I listen for the tap, tap of spruce and fir

And my heart's own indecipherable Morse code.
On such a morning
I should paint dead bones suddenly budded,

Leaves fleshing the ribs, the hips, thighs burgeoning
Out of their ivory reluctance,
Speech come again, an elm leaf for a tongue.

The sky looks hard in its clear indigo rinse.
I break through tough sleep
As the chapel bells spill their wet matins.

Almost overnight, briefer than a word,
Jack-in-the-pulpits come up,
Little helmeted warriors. Give me your sword.

Waterlilies

Late summer. This morning, before I woke,
Waterlilies broke open,
Supposing themselves out of the sheer dark.

I walk at the pond's edge. Leaves have grown
Bitter with age in the shallow wet.
Bronze is asserting itself in the flat green.

All morning these petals come up white
As my sister, flowering in childbirth
In the east room where they keep the windows shut;

And the bed is a pondful of lilies suddenly budded
In a blacked-out room in late summer.
The sun rises by itself at the iron bedstead.

I watch the pond losing its brandy color
Where lilies bob in the last heat of summer,
Duplicating themselves on the stone-cold mirror;

The house rises in a thick welter of trees
Out of the morning light. My sister
Wakes in the dark. Her arms are full of lilies.

Golden Fleece

This is a house of innumerable rooms.
The windows, fogged with blossoming pear,
Show how the stars go out, one at a time.
Invested on the outskirts of summer,

My maple is daubing the sky with frail gold.
I feel a season breaking its delicate tongues
On stone. These empty rooms are ghost-filled,
Smeared with a dead year's separate flowerings.

My hands, old rake-heads, lie on the pillow
In the toolshed of my Victorian fourposter.
Someone has trowelled gold on this thick blue.
As I slept, the buds enlarged their brown sculpture.

Once the sky was a palette of ashes.
The storm broke one late winter afternoon.
Now the maple clears and brightens; lilac bushes
Fester with blameless stars; a fugitive green

Wakes in the bone. This morning I note
My wine-red windowbox geranium,
A recluse taking in the good gold light.
I stretch. My arms break into dark blossom.

Timothy

You loved me because I brought you sugar cubes
Stolen at breakfast, dropped into my trousers
Furtively, under the flowered oilcloth.
Your nose a prickle at my knucklebones,
I watched leafshadows skittering like mice
Over your body's warm, incredible silk.

I brought you a bouquet of mustard flowers
Drenched in the morning dew, its bone-white lights,
And you ate it. I stood for hours, lonely,
Knee-deep in your bruised blue shadow,
The wire between us charged with tiny currents
That kept you hostage in your sunny meadow.

My grandmother told me death begins like this:
Stalled in the shadow of a horse, with morning
Breaking its lights around you. Before the summer vanished
The crickets stood up in their polished armor,
The milkweed stirred inside its knobby wardrobe.
My bones began to push against my skin.

In your kind eyes the summer broke itself:
Armloads of daisies, spikes of chicory,
The far-off chiming of the field frogs,
A ditch of Queen Anne's lace turned ragged
Flickered and burned away into each eye hole,
The displaced landscape anchored in your skull.

Inside your eyes I am a child, Timothy!
A small, inert reflection blooms and fades
Against those lilac-shaded surfaces—
A child smaller than a melting snowflake
Stretches his arms to you, one full of sweetness,
The other fountaining with yellow flowers.

Spider in the Grapes

I crouch among the arbor's swollen tongues:
They are the size of someone's thumb,
Blunt, oval shapes the color of carbon paper,
Casketed in shawls of smooth white dust.
Numb and forgetful, I observe the grape leaves.
They are brown as rust, in need of some mending—

I fashion tight cocoons to patch their raggedness,
And they endure. I squat among them,
Leveling my gaze on the horizons.
They seem to fray themselves night after night
As if they were not sure of their importance.
By dawn they will be wan as tarnished pewter.

Holding a small, precarious light,
By noon the sky will knit its minor fractures.
Another season is hammering it into mica.
Is this light the sum of what I know?
Even the flies have broken me—
Their little wings dangle like washed-out leaves.

In the torn cradles of my ruptured village.
The gnats steer off, busy with their offspring,
Fragile, elusive. The stars do not console me.
I long for a light impermanent as sunrise,
The shimmer of dragonflies after rain,
Clear drops of water silvering the grapeskins.

Tongues fit to burst, the grapes are harboring messages,
Their lusters peeling off. Do they contain the dark?
Frost has begun to lap the arbor's slats.
Tonight I'll wind myself in spools of silk,
Guarding the egg sac, all my frail belongings,
And shut my eyes before the sky grows faceless.

Tom O' Bedlam among the Sunflowers

To have gold in your back yard and not know it . . .
I woke this morning before your dreams had shredded
And found a curious thing: flowers made of gold,

Six-sided—more than that—broken on the flagstones,
Petals the color of a wedding band.
You are sleeping. The morning comes up gold.

Perhaps I made those flowers in my head,
For I have counted snowflakes in July
Blowing across my eyes like bits of calcium,

And I have stepped into your dreams at night,
A stranger there, my body steeped in moonlight.
I watched you tremble, washed in all that silver.

Love, the stars have fallen into the garden
And turned to frost. They have opened like a hand.
It is the color that breaks out of the bedsheets.

This morning the garden is littered with dry petals
As yellow as the page of an old book.
I step among them. They are brittle as bone china.

Suicide

Before I felt the bullet
Nip through my brain,
I stepped back, stepped back
To my grandmother's house
In the middle of summer.
The flagstones humped to the sagging porch,
And I followed them into the cellar.
I felt my skin grow damp and very cool.
Tendrils were poking through the cracked foundation.
The flies were humming a tiny mass
For a cricket who had died.
Upstairs, a clock whispered:
There is only this delicate hunching
Into your private death.
The dark began to spread around me
And I climbed the attic stairs
And found my other self,
The gentle one,
Lying there on a tattered sofa.
I was asleep.
And then somebody slammed the attic door.

In Fever

The field is white at the beginning
Of October. The crows are emptying their cries
Into the blank memory of heaven.

The front porch is cool all morning.
I watch the thistles moving their shabby weapons
Like a field of bad dreams.

The geranium pots are spilled
Over the flagstones.
There are splinters in the dry stalks.

The cry of a door is a pitiable thing.
Love, I am useless as a burnt-out match—
Your hands have sponged my body twice a day,

I am fed on stale water
And a light mixed in the center of the mirror,
The bottom of an ancient woman's cauldron.

The bedsprings are crying.
I move into sleep, climbing ten crumbling steps
Into a tawdry mansion.

Gangrene

All morning I have been turning into jade.
Ambushing the semiprecious bone,
It takes me in my swivel-bed

Where I watch my toes go out one by one.
A Victorian lady changes the sheets every Sunday,
The pigeon-colored nurses leave me alone

With clouds fingerprinting on the grapeskin sky.
I nestle in these white, icy hillocks
As their razors clip me clean as a boy.

I am inattentive to their deepest looks.
Now I have whitewashed walls and a white pitcher,
Armloads of white, virginity that speaks.

Light blunders in rich and gold as beer
From a world where people wake and kiss,
Images shaken free on dark water.

I await the syringe, its needleful of brightness,
As my leg yields to a century of stone.
I am a fossil, hugging its dry rose.

I wake slowly, just at the outskirts of pain.
A light-winged lady rushes off into the dark,
Her beacon red as my garnet tiepin.

Nobody minds me at all now as I suck
Greedily at darkness, its flaky soot
Blown in at the window crack,

A mouthful of honey. Under my bedlight
I am a park statue, I am all verdigris,
Tenable as an old penny. Tonight

Nobody stops at the door. In the hospital garden
The moon rises like a white button out of a bed
Of brown chrysanthemums. Sickness

Begins to mount me like a bright counterpane,
Intractable and ripe as a middleaged bride,
And my head goes under. Dark is a sudden kiss.

Tom O' Bedlam Makes Love

Sparrows are dancing in the eaves. I have a sparrow's tongue.
Out on the lake the gulls turn into whitecaps
And pulse into the blue. I lean against the pane.
Lake waves keep slapping in. Last night, in my sleep,
I heard my father shout O *I am hungry!*
I open the window on a slick blue summer sky.

All morning I have been bailing out my bed,
Buckets of trembling light, for I would float to you.
My tongue takes measure of your throat. It is an inchworm.
It moves inside your mouth like someone's voice.
Now it investigates your eardrums, now
The blue veins of your neck. Now it is quoting Emerson.

Inside me, locked up in a tiny cell,
The devil hides himself. He is a ripe volt waiting,
He is a yellow dwarf with ragged nails,
Waiting. I am his warder. I own the key.
One click and he is eating his way out.
My penis sings like a tuning fork.

O my love I am a slide trombone
When I slide into you. I am matches to your straw.
Love, the devil is dancing in our skin—
He is the layer of salt between our tongues;
He is the needle in my chest, he dives across my rib cage,
He dances like an angel on my buttocks.

As August is full of juice I am full of you.
As the earth sways I sway into your body.
I am swinging north, I graze the edge of Canada,
My belly splits with little pointed crocuses.
The yellow man is dancing with a pitchfork
Across a flamy acre, and the lake,
Hissing like Saint Patrick's snakes, slides back.

Pears on the Windowsill

This morning I have been remembering
How my mother's hands knotted one September
And then grew very still.

A girl is coming up the hill
With apples in her white apron.
The light moves outside her body.

Outdoors, the leaves of the pear trees
Are the color of a house in need of paint.
They are like enormous flakes of darkness.

Sunlight is smeared over the flagstones.
A worm is measuring a tomato leaf
As if it were the map of Italy.

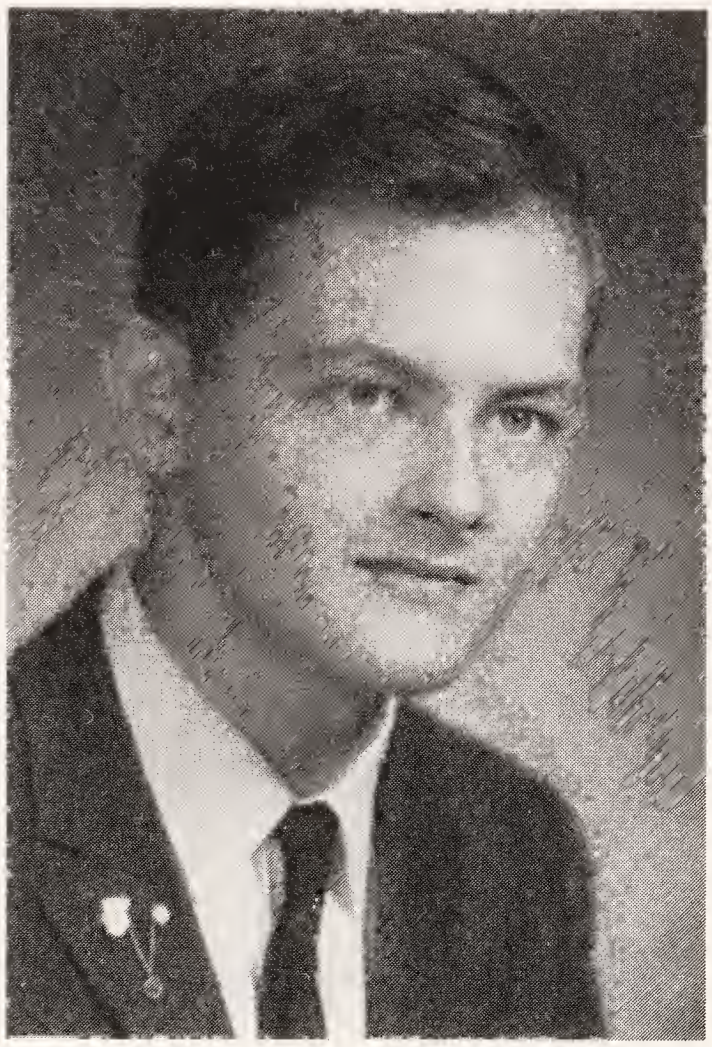
The sun strikes my perfect skin.
My inheritors move in me
Like darkening water.

The Wharf

They only ask you for one coin.
You hold it on your tongue like a small, perfect moon
Carved out of your father's body,
Good as a pearl or some frost-colored capsule
You saved for years to swallow at the end.
The only trouble you will encounter
Is being accepted. It's a ritual like any other,
Only simpler, and it isn't any use to haggle.
The conductor will come up out of the mouth pit
With his eyes stuck full of pins and the mule's breath.
The trick is to get through by just enduring.
Think of it as a ceremony, the sort of thing
That passes while you are thinking of something else.
The death of your brother, an appendix scar,
The apple you hacked open one morning in Omaha.
After this, the darkness will part on one side,
And you will know the beauty of entry.
The pity of it is that they make
You leave everything behind at once,
The small carved box of your sister, the puppy's heart,
The china doll with the light sucked out of its eyes.
The only trinket you are permitted is the coin,
And even that they will take at the beginning.
Do not expect the metal branch at the end;
That would be confiscated immediately.
After a while you will begin to hear the carlocks
Talking to themselves in a corner of the boat
And the dark water spreading easily out of your right side.
Do not mind the feeling that something is gone for good
Or the sound of frogs gossiping under the surface.

Soon, only the hollow of your abdomen will be left
And the index finger you used to dial wrong numbers.
Suddenly, it will be a day somewhere in winter
And you are sailing your boat in a wooden tub of icewater
Where the bones of a toad and geranium stems are floating.
Then the pain will begin in your mastoid cavity,
And your mother will be talking to her own ears
In the pantry of a house you have forgotten.

At the very end you only climb out of your body.



Thomas James was born in 1946 and lived most of his life in Joliet, Illinois. He was the author of *Letters to a Stranger.* His poetry appeared in magazines and anthologies, including *North American Review, Poetry,* and *Poetry Northwest,* which awarded him the Theodore Roethke Prize in 1969. In 1974, at the age of twenty-seven, he died shortly after the original publication of this book.

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